

Resolving Korea's Nuclear Crisis: Tough Choices for China

by Howard M. Krawitz

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Key Points

In the search for ways to defuse the nuclear standoff with North Korea, all eyes have turned to Beijing. Seoul, Tokyo, Washington, and even, to some extent, Pyongyang all increasingly seem to assume that China will be the pivotal actor in resolving the present crisis. Given China's economic power, growing military strength, long-time relationship with North Korea, and sheer size, this seems a reasonable assumption. Yet it is also a highly questionable one, given a close examination of the contradictory pressures faced by the Chinese leadership.

For Beijing, the situation in North Korea is more complicated, less clear-cut, and perhaps even riskier than it is for any of the other involved parties, except, perhaps, South Korea. Its relations with Pyongyang are conflicted and increasingly contradictory. The very tools that seemingly give China potential leverage are all, by nature, double-edged and could redound to Beijing's disadvantage.

China recognizes that it cannot afford to be passive. Such a posture could aggravate the security concerns of its neighbors and deal a blow to its regional ambitions. Beijing's most likely path will be to seek a multilateral approach that enhances its prestige and influence, while also avoiding extreme reactions in Pyongyang and providing political cover in the event of continued stalemate, or worse.

Clearly, Washington and Beijing do not see eye to eye on North Korea. From the U.S. perspective, North Korea is a rogue state (one that is still technically a U.S. enemy, to boot), with an announced intent to develop further its nuclear capability and acquire nuclear weapons—in spite of formal agreements in which Pyongyang promised not to engage in such pursuits. Pyongyang's rhetoric and behavior highlight its willingness to use nuclear blackmail as a tool for achieving its aims. It has heightened tensions by implying that it might export nuclear weapons or fissile material if its needs are not met. Summed up, North Korea poses a tangible, real-time threat to U.S. allies in East Asia and to U.S. national security interests.

Viewed from this perspective, Washington must ensure that North Korea immediately ceases its nuclear development efforts and commits to fully verifiable nonproliferation safeguards. Then, and only then, can Washington begin taking steps to address North Korea's economic woes and other demands. The problem, however, is that North Korea is a proven violator of agreements. The list of broken promises reads ominously: the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the International Atomic Energy Agency Safeguards agreement, the North-South De-Nuclearization Accords, and, perhaps most damaging to budding U.S.-North Korean dialogue, the Agreed Framework of 1994, under which North Korea agreed to freeze activities at its Yongbyon nuclear complex in return for external assistance.

North Korea is a potential source of proliferation for technology relating to weapons of

mass destruction and/or the actual weapons themselves to other rogue states or terrorist entities. Even though North Korea is not generally seen as exporting or directly supporting international terrorism at this time, it has been guilty of such behavior in the past and remains a clear and unrelenting threat to U.S. allies South Korea and, possibly, Japan. Pyongyang's predilection for confrontation and coercion, harsh rhetoric and blackmail, and its total lack of credibility when it comes to honoring commitments make it a poor candidate for meaningful negotiations. All this reinforces a strong conviction in Washington that the only safe course is, in effect, to get the goods up front and—to paraphrase former President Ronald Reagan's famous guidance—verify, then trust.

Beijing sees things from a dramatically different angle. Chinese-North Korean relations exist in a far more congenial environment than the one that shapes U.S.-North Korea interactions. Beijing does not believe North Korea threatens Chinese interests or Chinese national security, nor does China necessarily see North Korea as a destabilizing element in East Asia. Judging from statements that Chinese officials occasionally make—unofficially, to be sure—China does not seem to view the issue of North Korea's possessing nuclear weapons in the same perspective or with the same urgency that Washington does. Nor does China seem to think North Korea would proliferate nuclear weapons as a matter of course. It is generally assumed that China would prefer to see a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons, but China might also begrudgingly accept North Korean possession of a limited number of

nuclear devices, if China received assurances of no first use from North Korea and guarantees that Tokyo and Seoul would not seek to acquire nuclear devices to offset Pyongyang's nuclear advantage. For Beijing, the real horrors of nuclear proliferation in Asia lie in the specter of a nuclear-armed Japan and, in a worst-case scenario, Taiwan.

China also tends to view Pyongyang's security concerns in a more sympathetic light than do observers in Washington, Tokyo, and even Seoul. Beijing tends to be more understanding of Pyongyang's rhetoric and seemingly excessive behavior, interpreting these as the manifestations of a (perhaps unstable) regime that is hard pressed by economic and political problems, convinced that it is beset by enemies seeking its demise, probably increasingly cognizant of its fragility, and fearful for its own survival. To some extent, China buys into the hypothesis that North Korea is paranoid because it really does have so many enemies: Beijing has often suggested that the United States perpetuates its difficult relationship with North Korea through Washington's unceasingly hostile, rigid stance toward Pyongyang.

Historical Burdens

Chinese interlocutors also tend to express a sense of responsibility for the North Korean state, a sentiment that often falls on disbelieving ears in other countries but nevertheless has credence in China's historical and cultural context. Chinese-Korean relations are built on a complex political and cultural history that dates back hundreds of years. Throughout much of the 19th century, China heavily influenced Korean governance—in many cases directly manipulating the appointment of senior ministers in the Korean court—and acted as Korea's interlocutor and mediator with the outside world, especially in Korea's early dealings with the United States. In fact, Qing Dynasty officials, for good or for ill, were the primary intermediaries in the process that produced the first formal agreement between the United States and Korea, a commerce treaty signed in 1882. Chinese influence continued

throughout the 20th century, from Yuan Shikai's meddling in Korean military affairs during China's early Republican period to Mao Zedong's sending aid, in the form of "Chinese volunteers," to support a fellow communist state and ally in 1950.

Since 1950, successive Communist Chinese political and military leaders have consistently affirmed China's close relationship with sister communist state North Korea; the 1961 China-North Korean pact on friendly cooperation and mutual assistance remains in force today. To be

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sure, there is much debate over whether China would actually honor this agreement should there be a full-scale crisis. But until such a moment occurs, the answer is unknowable, even for Beijing. The fact that the agreement exists affects Chinese behavior to a degree. Beijing must continuously guard against being maneuvered into an irrevocable position. China does not have an adversarial relationship with North Korea and does not want one.

But Chinese-North Korean relations are no longer as simple as they were in the Cold War years. Politics, economics, the world, and, most of all, China have all changed greatly over the past several decades. North Korea, however, has *not* changed; it remains isolated, failing, belligerent, and, increasingly, a diplomatic, as well as economic, deadweight on China. The result is that Chinese-North Korean relations have become more conflicted and contradictory, making Beijing's choices regarding Pyongyang tougher and, to all indications, leaving Chinese public opinion regarding North Korea divided, or at least unclear.

Consider, for example, the reported results of a survey released in June 2003 by the China State Survey Institute (SSIC), a newly formed, quasi-governmental organization associated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.¹

This survey suggested that a majority of China's people would support Beijing's siding with Pyongyang in any open clash with the United States, including armed conflict. At the same time, surveys done by Beijing University's Research Institute on Korean Peninsula Issues suggest that 80 to 90 percent of Chinese would oppose China's involvement, in a war on the peninsula. Critics of the SSIC survey say most respondents had not been asked to consider the consequences that such a decision would have on Chinese-South Korean relations, in particular, or the economic and diplomatic implications this might have for China, in general. They suggest such omissions skewed the survey and created a false conclusion that popular focus remains on "traditional ally and close neighbor" North Korea. Similarly, there are questions about whether the Beijing University survey populations were representative of thinking among the Chinese population as a whole.

Limited Leverage

Thus, for Beijing, the task becomes a tricky one of undertaking public diplomacy that casts China in a positive light as an important, helpful broker while simultaneously allowing it to remain flexible and to tread a fine line that avoids direct involvement or a perceived commitment to any side. While engaged in this balancing act, Beijing must also ensure that it neither loses credibility with Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul nor angers Pyongyang to a point where China undermines whatever ability it now possesses to influence North Korean behavior.

This is not simply artful dodging on China's part. Outside observers tend to assume that Beijing occupies the dominant position in the bilateral relationship, that it can impress its will upon Pyongyang, and that it has the leverage—military and economic—to back up its demands. But Beijing's actual degree of dominance and the efficacy of the levers that it can bring to bear are, in both contexts, problematical and unclear. China exercises what might be termed *soft power* influence over Pyongyang. By providing economic support and helping buttress North Korea against an otherwise hostile world, China enhances its credentials with Pyongyang and, by extension, its ability to use moral suasion to exert measured political pressure on a regime generally unresponsive to outside influences. China is probably aided in this by the fact that the Kim Jong Il regime

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likely realizes on some level that it jeopardizes its own survival if it isolates itself from its only credible interlocutor in the international community. Thus, China probably can constrain, to a certain degree, Pyongyang from immediate rash action and perhaps, over time, even modify North Korean policies and behavior.

Yet at the same time, China's ability to force sudden, unwelcome change on Pyongyang may be more limited than outsiders accept. North Korea's economic reform initiative offers a telling example. In recent years, during Kim Jong Il's several trips to China, Chinese officials have taken him to various prosperous areas for a first-hand look at the benefits of economic reform, part of Chinese efforts to convince Kim of the importance of undertaking a similar initiative in North Korea. So far Beijing's efforts have had scant positive impact in Pyongyang. North Korean economic reform efforts have been almost nonexistent. The few that have been assayed—the Siniuiju special economic zone, for example—are spectacular failures. In fact, Pyongyang's choice of controversial entrepreneur Yang Bin to run the zone despite his status as an alleged economic criminal in China may actually have strained relations between Beijing and Pyongyang.

Economic Dimensions

A brief look at economic factors affecting the equation point to Beijing's dilemma even more clearly.

China is without question the economically stronger state. Beijing keeps the regime in Pyongyang afloat with aid as needed. It does this to some extent because of humanitarian concerns and obligations to a historic partner and neighbor. But these are not the only reasons for Chinese largesse. Beijing is also well aware that it is subject to an indirect form of economic blackmail. Under worst-case scenarios, withholding food, fuel, or other economic aid or acquiescing in externally imposed economic sanctions could significantly weaken or bring down the North Korean state. The resulting internal chaos would almost certainly put China in the diplomatically untenable position of having to use force to stop masses of North Korean economic refugees from flooding into Northeast China. Beijing would either have to seal its common borders or establish a *cordon sanitaire* somewhere in North Korean territory.

Either action would likely bring rapid, serious international censure.

Equally painful would be the likely reaction from ethnic Korean Chinese citizens, roughly two million of whom live in China's Liaoning and Jilin Provinces, which border on North Korea, and in Shandong Province, which faces North Korea across the Yellow Sea. Many Korean-Chinese, especially those living in Northeast China's Yanbian Autonomous Region, still speak Korean natively and have substantial trade and personal ties stretching deep into North Korea. Korean influence is so strong in this region that even many ethnic Han who live there use Korean as their primary language on a daily basis. The domestic outcry against Beijing's use of force against Korean refugees would likely be swift and severe.

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But allowing a flood of refugees would create equally painful consequences. Beijing would be forced to establish refugee camps on a massive scale. It would have to provide food and medical aid in a region of China already hard hit by economic dislocations now occurring as China transforms its economy. Once the showplace of China's state-owned heavy industries, the provinces close to North Korea now constitute China's rust belt. There is massive unemployment and underemployment. Resources are scarce. Standards of living have dropped. Quality of life has declined. There is growing loss of confidence in and distrust of the Chinese Communist Party and the central government in Beijing. There have been serious incidents of popular protest. Beijing is keenly aware of the tense atmosphere and heightened prospects for unrest in the region.

The economic burden of supporting thousands of refugees in this hard-hit area would be staggering for China. The cost in social stability could also be staggering. Chinese authorities could expect to see alarming increases in crime, in social disorder, perhaps even in hate crimes against Koreans, as ethnic Chinese in the region began to resent the refugees and the perceived "preferential treatment" they received. China faced similar problems with domestic resent-

ment when it resettled thousands of Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s during China's border war with Vietnam.

Military Dimensions

Humanitarian and diplomatic issues are only part of the equation: military considerations probably also give Beijing plenty of cause for concern when weighing possible actions. Arguably, China is the more powerful state militarily, but North Korea, with a million-man standing army well equipped with conventional weapons and geared for land war, would still constitute a serious threat. Another consideration is possible erosion in the degree of influence that China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) retains over the Korean People's Army (KPA), despite the long-term, close relationship between the two militaries.

Even though the probability of a full-scale war between China and North Korea seems extremely remote, it is not wholly outside the realm of possibility, especially if Pyongyang were to come to believe Beijing was selling it out: reportedly, even in China, Korea watchers have been known to comment on the unpredictability of the Kim Jong Il regime. Still, there is some potential for armed clashes to flare on a lesser scale, as possible consequences of Chinese actions. For example, it is unlikely that Pyongyang would quietly tolerate Chinese troops occupying North Korean territory, if Beijing were to establish a *cordon sanitaire* as described earlier.

An added uncertainty is the extent to which the Pyongyang regime might interpret shifts in Chinese policy concerning the Korean Peninsula—for example, Chinese willingness to adopt stronger measures against North Korea in concert with Washington and its allies—as threats to the regime's survival and a spur to "do or die" actions.

Significant policy reversals by Beijing could undermine the current regime's hold on power. This, in turn, could ignite several disaster scenarios, all with possible spillover effects for China: Kim Jong Il could lash out against China in anger; factional fighting or power struggles could break out within the North Korean military; or a total meltdown of authority could lead to banditry by rogue North Korean military elements. All these are dire, but not totally implausible, possibilities.

Even assuming no direct clashes, the military burden on China could still be onerous. Internal breakdowns in North Korea would necessitate, at minimum, strengthening Chinese border defenses, meaning a probable need to move troops, equipment, and security/intelligence assets into the region from other military regions. Financial costs aside, Beijing would also have to consider the consequences of changing current security postures in its troubled Northwest provinces, Tibet, the Sino-Indian and Sino-Vietnam border regions, and the Taiwan Straits military area. In some way, this would almost mirror the difficult choice Mao had to make in 1950 when he had to decide between action in Korea or action against Matsu and Quemoy.

Given Chinese sensitivity to these and similar scenarios and the plausible assumption that even the Chinese consider Kim Jong Il and his government unpredictable, China's generally risk-averse leadership probably finds itself under constant pressure to monitor North Korean reactions and assess the limits to which it can go before unintentionally precipitating unwanted North Korean responses. This is no small matter. Injudicious application of strength could easily turn nastily against the user. As noted earlier, outside observers widely assume that China has the leverage to bend Pyongyang to its will—an assumption yet to be proven and probably one that Beijing would prefer not to put to the test. Viewed from this perspective, moderated nonthreatening approaches then become the method of choice, and Beijing's patterns of dealing with North Korea become more understandable. Two examples come to mind: oil shipments and North Korean refugees.

Much has been made of the hiatus in Chinese oil shipments to North Korea in early 2003, which some viewed as Beijing's way of pressuring Pyongyang into compromising on conditions under which it would agree to meet with the United States. But China has consistently been careful to explain the shutdown, which was only for a few days, as having been necessitated by maintenance requirements. Even if one accepts that China actually used the occasion to make certain vulnerabilities clear to North Korea—and there is no direct evidence to this effect, although it is a reasonable assumption—China did so in a way that avoided international embarrassment for and prevented any serious rift with Pyongyang. Similarly, prior to the public furor raised by

South Korean and other international non-governmental organizations, Beijing had generally adopted a “wink and nod” attitude toward North Korean refugees. But once the problem became exposed to public scrutiny, China, which has a repatriation arrangement with Pyongyang, was unable to sweep the issue under the rug.

Credibility and Image

Economic and military consequences are not the only ramifications that Beijing must consider in managing its involvement in the current crisis. Preserving face is also a major consideration governing the limits to which China will venture. The specter of a possible public diplomacy failure and the prospect of

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subsequent international humiliation are real fears for Beijing, given Chinese aspirations of being seen as a premier power in Asia and credible actor on the global stage.

To prevent any such debacle, Beijing must walk a fine line in presenting itself as skilled in international diplomacy, while also clearly demonstrating that it is an equal among equals, charting its own course. In this regard, it would be unlikely to sign on to any initiative that might create an impression that it is following Washington's lead, doing Washington's bidding, or taking Washington's side. Using its good offices to engineer the important April 2003 talks between U.S. and North Korean representatives in Beijing stands as an example of this tactic. By simply bringing the opposing sides together, China could claim a diplomatic success (China engineered the meeting) without being held to any specific standard of performance (China was not a direct participant, therefore not responsible for the lack of tangible results). Thus, Beijing sought to cultivate an image as a capable facilitator and regional power while minimizing the risk of getting too far out on any front. It also conveyed the impression of being helpful to Washington while minimizing chances for riling

Pyongyang—an outcome that will last so long as North Korea remains persuaded that China acts with Pyongyang's interests in mind.

China also is concerned about preserving its image and credibility with third world countries. For example, China has traditionally been on relatively good terms with Iran, Libya, Syria, and other states that Washington has historically considered supporters of terrorism, threatening to U.S. security interests, or otherwise suspect. Beijing has normal trade and diplomatic relations with most of these states and does not wish, for various reasons, to create problems with them—Iran, for example, is a major supplier of oil to China. Certainly, the lesson would not be lost on such states if Beijing were to reverse its policy suddenly concerning North Korea, especially if such a move were interpreted as having occurred in response to U.S. urging, and absent a compelling Chinese national security reason. This last point would be tricky because China has consistently argued that North Korea does not pose a threat to its neighbors and that Chinese-North Korean trade does not violate generally accepted international standards of lawful trade practices; it advances similar positions concerning Iran and other somewhat problematic states. Consequently, any sudden, unjustified policy reversals would greatly undermine China's credibility in the nonaligned world.

Beijing's Sense of Threat

It can be argued that China would stand to benefit more from making common cause with the United States than in continuing relationships with North Korea and other such pariah states. However, this is not necessarily a convincing argument for the leadership in Beijing, especially given the fickle nature of U.S. policy stances toward China over the past two decades, Washington's tendency to assume the dominant role in its relationships, and its propensity to de-link matters of critical importance to Beijing, such as Taiwan or Tibet, from negotiations on proliferation and other similar transnational issues. Thus, for example, the Department of State's recently released report, *Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record*, is, in Chinese eyes, a clear example of America professing to want better cooperative relations with China, while simultaneously criticizing China and eroding possible Chinese goodwill that would help bring about such cooperation.² Given this perception

of Washington's conflicted China policy, it would be difficult for any Chinese leaders to justify taking Washington's side in peninsula issues at this time.

As noted above, China and the United States do not hold similar views concerning the threats certain countries pose to international peace and stability, even less to China's own national security. Given present circumstances, China may see little verifiable benefit in signing on to the U.S. position; conversely, Beijing might even hold that doing so would actually undermine its own interests by creating suspicion, mistrust, and other long-term problems in places where it now has none. Looked at from this angle, it could even be argued that the United States poses a bigger threat to China than North Korea does. Since the advent of the U.S. war on terrorism, the United States has steadily expanded its military presence in Central Asia and undermined Chinese diplomatic efforts in the region, even as it has pursued an increasingly aggressive campaign against terrorist states. For Beijing, the specter of American military encirclement and possible U.S. policies that seek China's containment looms large. The fear that aggressive American action could destabilize the Korean Peninsula (with China bearing the brunt) also increasingly is a cause for concern.

Still, if dancing to Washington's tune is not the answer for China, neither is ignoring impending crisis on the peninsula. Just as Beijing would regard a destabilized North Korea as a real threat, it also would fear the consequences of a nuclear-armed North Korea, albeit for different reasons than Washington. China would probably be able to accept Pyongyang's having some limited nuclear capability—after all, Beijing does not fear a strike from Pyongyang. For China, the fear is that nuclear weapons in Pyongyang would fuel proliferation in Asia, with Tokyo, Seoul, and maybe even Taipei deciding that, even with a missile defense shield, having their own nuclear deterrents would be the only guarantee of security. This would be of great concern to China, and while such a scenario may seem farfetched to outside observers, it may not be so to Beijing.

China's Way Ahead

Ultimately, China may be spurred to action by a different set of motives than the United States. It clearly recognizes that it must do something to control things on the Korean

Peninsula. Moreover, for all its differences with Washington, there is no doubt about Beijing's wanting better U.S.-China relations. The challenge is in choosing an approach that poses minimal risk to Chinese interests while maximizing chances of gaining the advantages that China seeks, including maintaining a cordial, working relationship with Pyongyang. A multilateral approach seems the best tactic, but even here Beijing must be careful. It cannot afford to get caught up in events that could ultimately lead to China's finding itself thwarted by U.S. influence or in the embarrassing situation of having to take the lead in blocking a United Nations (UN) vote that could lead to a binding

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resolution—clearly, absent any telling change in the current situation, for Beijing, Korean Peninsula issues must be kept clear of the UN Security Council. By the same token, China cannot afford to take a wholly passive approach that leaves it vulnerable to accusations that it is oblivious to human rights issues or to security issues of concern to its neighbors in Asia.

The most plausible option for Beijing is a multilateral approach that enables it a chance to play a dominant role while simultaneously providing ample political cover—something like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations + 3, multi-party talks that include Russia, or some similar North Asian coalition. Such a course would be highly attractive to China's leaders. Involving concerned states that are nonthreatening to North Korea could make it easier to mollify North Korean leaders' fears about their continued survival and persuade them to modify their rhetoric and scale down their demands—perhaps even persuade

Pyongyang to make a positive overture. It could make it easier to bring European Union countries on board in support of Beijing's initiatives. It also, in Beijing's view, might make it easier to negotiate with North Korea a workable, enforceable inspection and verification regime concerning weapons of mass destruction acceptable to the greater global community. This would have the advantage of keeping Pyongyang calm by keeping the United States at arms length and undercutting its demands for a more aggressive approach. An additional advantage for China is that this sort of initiative could help improve Beijing-Seoul cooperation, drawing them closer together on a number of fronts, perhaps even weakening the U.S.-Korean alliance a little bit. If played correctly, it could reduce U.S. influence in the region while enhancing Chinese prestige, with relatively little diplomatic risk.

Still, in the final analysis, China's strategy is hostage to Pyongyang's ability to see reason. Beijing is more likely to maintain its current course and try a strategy like the one explored above if Kim Jong Il and company are willing to compromise and give Beijing face and support in its efforts. Continued North Korean intransigence and a worsening of conditions on the peninsula, however, will probably force China to buy into the U.S. approach eventually and to move toward more complete cooperation with the United States on Korean Peninsula issues. The challenge for Beijing will be in assessing the costs of working with Washington and trying to collect on the bill.

Notes

¹ American Broadcasting Company News Online, poll, *Chinese Would Support North Korea in War Against U.S.*, June 16, 2003, accessed at <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newstitems/s881118.htm>>.

² Department of State, *Supporting Human Rights and Democracy: The U.S. Record 2002–2003* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003).

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